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Pro-Trade Democrats Go AWOL

Back in 1993, Vice President Al Gore went on prime-time television to debate Ross Perot, a foe of free trade, in a clash Mr. Gore is widely believed to have won. The debate helped propel supporters of the North American Free Trade Agreement to victory in a 234-to-200 cliffhanger in the House. Some 102 Democrats -- representing the party traditionally more skeptical of liberalized trade -- voted for the pact. Afterward, President Bill Clinton called Nafta a defining moment for America. He said the country had decided not to retreat in a world where "change is the only constant." Then he thanked lawmakers, particularly his fellow Democrats, for "voting their consciences."

Where are those Democrats now? Fast forward 12 years, and Mr. Clinton's wife, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, has yet to decide whether she's going to support the Central American Free Trade Agreement, or Cafta, which would open up trade, valued at \$32 billion, between the United States and El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Only four Democrats have announced their support, while the list of Democrats against grows ever longer. Last month the influential, centrist New Democrat Coalition of House lawmakers, usually pro-trade, came out against the deal.

The centrist Democrats argue that the Bush administration's irresponsible fiscal policies have robbed the nation of the ability to invest in programs that would cushion the blow for workers whose jobs migrate. It's true that America should be much more aggressive and creative on that front. But globalization isn't going away whether Cafta gets approved or not. Free-trade Democrats should be using their leverage to get more support for retraining assistance to displaced workers, not simply posturing with blanket opposition.

The Democrats also argue that the trade agreement's labor provisions don't go far enough to protect workers in the six other countries. But they are ignoring a provision that improves on existing rules by taking fines collected for violations of labor laws and using them to correct labor infractions. That's far better than the current system, in which penalties collected for labor violations end up in the United States Treasury.

The crux of the opposition seems to come from a general feeling of peevishness that the Bush administration didn't consult more with the pro-trade Democrats while negotiating the agreement. When you add that to the general anger over the Bush administration's failure to really negotiate with Democrats over issues from prescription drugs to education reform, it's understandable that they feel burned. But that doesn't make it right for them to take their marbles and go home. The Central American people deserve better.

Cafta would lower tariffs and help job growth in a needy region. It would encourage growth in the region's textile and apparel industries, a huge helping hand at a time when China is sucking up textile manufacturing jobs. The American Farm Bureau Federation

estimates that Cafta would increase United States agricultural exports by \$1.5 billion a year. The National Association of Manufacturers says the trade agreement would add \$1 billion a year to United States exports of manufactured goods. And a study by the United States International Trade Commission estimates that Cafta, when fully implemented, would cut the trade deficit by \$756 million.

"This issue is much too important to allow your unhappiness with when somebody called you and when you were consulted stop you from doing what you know is right," says Cal Dooley, the former California Democratic congressman. He's right.